

Review of *Fates of the Performative: From the Linguistic Turn to the New Materialism* by Jeffrey T. Nealon (University of Minnesota Press)

by [Abigail Culpepper](#) | [Issue 12.1 \(Spring 2023\)](#), [Book Reviews](#)

ABSTRACT Jeffrey T. Nealon's *Fates of the Performative: From the Linguistic Turn to the New Materialism* crafts a history of performativity within contemporary theoretical thought. Through the structure of a genealogy, Nealon examines the nascence of performativity and its intersection with biopolitics and neoliberalism to predict not only the future of the performative, but also to imagine new avenues of criticism within the humanities.

KEYWORDS [labor](#), [neoliberalism](#), [literary studies](#), [performance](#), [cultural studies](#), [biopolitics](#), [humanities](#), [materialism](#)

Fates of the Performative: From the Linguistic Turn to the New Materialism. By Jeffrey T. Nealon. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2021. Pp 240. (paper) ISBN 978-1-5179-1086-0. US List \$25.

With witty candor, Jeffrey T. Nealon tracks the history of the performative from its origin in J. L. Austin's speech act theory to the twenty-first century, where even the meaning of life, Nealon argues, has been co-opted into the process of neoliberal production. In the face of such a challenge, Nealon argues for the importance of performativity to both our academic work and lives. Engaging with myriad schools of thought, from deconstruction and object-oriented ontology to post-critique and more, *Fates of the Performative: From the Linguistic Turn to the New Materialism* is an insightful addition to both literary and cultural theory. It is important work for those concerned with modern labor politics, biopolitical critique, or even the mechanics of meaning-making in the modern age. Despite the references to deconstruction and realist philosophy, in this book Nealon puts a twist on Foucauldian genealogy. He traces the past of performativity under the linguistic turn to imagine its future under what he calls the "biopolitical turn," which blurs the lines between life, labor, and literature. Nealon's projections offer hope for future study of the humanities, as he

concludes that shifting our discussions of meaning to those of performance will allow for a more accurate description of the complex interconnectivity we experience.

Fates of the Performative is divided into two parts, "Genealogy of the Performative" and "Performativity and/as/into Biopolitics." The first examines the performative as a theoretical concept, while the second examines the future or "fates" of the performative in the current age of global neoliberalism. In the first half, Nealon makes a distinction between performativity that is concerned with meaning and performativity that is concerned with doing, or "performative force." Here, the author stakes his claim for a rethinking of the performative, with an emphasis on *doing over meaning*, as doing shows the "entanglement of forces that inheres in any seemingly settled state or being" (37). In the second half of the book, Nealon parses out the political reality of the twenty-first century, linking the death of social constructionism to the rise of a biopolitical state. According to Nealon, under the current neoliberal system in which existence has been commodified, "performative subjectivity or human capital finds its charge not through making products and commodities but in the on-going project of making ourselves" (114–15). Thus, biopolitical neoliberalism has made life the site of its own production, so Nealon argues, and as such we need a different critical approach.

In this text, Foucauldian genealogy meets historical materialism, as Nealon explains that contemporary criticism is merely reifying the neoliberal system of ceaseless production (evident in the continual production of newer, better theories to replace faulty, dated ones—planned obsolescence meets critical theory). Therefore, criticism needs to be more responsive to current political circumstances, to maintain its critical edge. To this end, Nealon engages with a variety of modern and contemporary theorists, from those of the linguistic turn to the new materialism. To illustrate the varied fates of the performative, Nealon contextualizes debates and discussions in contemporary theory with which he is engaging, such as Bruno Latour's position on post-critique, Karen Barad's notion of intra-action, and questions of labor in the twenty-first century.

Nealon begins the first half of the book with a chapter on the performative in the works of J. L. Austin and Jacques Derrida. In this chapter, the author highlights the importance of the comic to the efficacy of Austin's and Derrida's theories, while warding off claims that post-structuralist theory is to blame for the post-truth era. According to Nealon, Derrida rewrites Austin's linguistic performativity as a force that is both in and beyond language, making space for affective approaches to meaning. While Nealon initially notes the presence of this "performative force" in the first chapter, he moves on in the second chapter to diagnosing the fates of two branches of the performative, each derived from the works of Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick, respectively. For Nealon, it is Sedgwick's theory of performativity which has become the foundation for future interventions because her

work considers the biopolitical implications of performative force present in deconstruction but left unelucidated. From this, he positions performativity as a biopolitical action, which forces us to rethink what matters, in both the semantic and material senses of the word.

In the third chapter, Nealon critiques new materialism through an analysis of the resonances between Jane Bennet's *Vibrant Matter* and Henry David Thoreau's oeuvre. He interrogates their shared desire to get the most out of life, instilling the mundane with new (vibrant) meaning. Nealon diagnoses this move towards "more life" not as the solution to commodified life in the twenty-first century, but as the same impulse of its subjugation—biopolitical control (life must be made into more life, better life). Thus, new materialism does not offer an escape from the devaluation of life as material, instead it extends the reach of biopolitics—sucking out all the marrow of life, not for the experience in itself but as a novelty. This turn towards *bio*-political production, allows Nealon to move on from his genealogical project towards a consideration of performativity's fate(s) in the contemporary moment.

In the second half of the book, Nealon shifts his perspective forward from the historical, as he begins to sketch out the present and future fates of the performative. The author pivots to a discussion of the performative in the modern labor market in the fourth chapter, building on the expansion of the biopolitical that is detailed in chapter 3. Here, Nealon delineates how Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* continues the economic analysis of labor and capital accumulation laid out in Karl Marx's *Capital*. As an economist, Picketty relies on social science methodology which leads Nealon to posit that conceptual approaches of philosophy and cultural theory might enhance and expand this analysis of capitalism. As such, Nealon broadens the purely economic scope of this analysis with a biopolitical discussion of human capital in an age when many are employed in the so-called "knowledge economy." In this chapter, Nealon explains that while early twentieth-century capitalism focused on creating conformity through disciplinary power, neoliberal capitalism transforms the economic acts of spending and laboring into the construction of an identity, replacing disciplinary power with biopower. We are thus all caught up in "biopolitical performativity," laboring in service of our own self-creation, in which how we spend our time and money defines who we are.

This discussion of labor continues into the fifth chapter, which is noteworthy for those interested in theories of academic labor. In this chapter, Nealon addresses Michel Foucault's lecture, "What Is an Author?" among others. He begins by noting that teaching or lecturing is often considered secondary to the academic work of writing and publishing, yet ironically the lectures of many famous authors, notably Foucault, have been published in posthumous volumes. In his discussion of Foucault's lectures, Nealon juxtaposes two developments within research in the humanities in response to neoliberalism. The first

trend illustrates a renewed interest in the author-function in response to the rise of biopolitical performativity, since the author speaks from a particular biopolitical location (at the intersection of race, class, gender, age, etc.). The second development moves away from the author-function in response to the proliferation of textuality in the internet age. This second approach includes those such as Rita Felski's "post-critical reading" and Franco Moretti's "distant reading," which respond to the growing impossibility of deciphering a specific text. Nealon closes the chapter by turning to the "lecturer" as a job title within academia. Based on the discussion of the "author-function," Nealon concludes that, due to the lack of institutional support, lecturers lack *authority*. That is to say, a lecturer's time is taken up lecturing rather than authoring. Thus, the position of a lecturer, as a particular type of author-function, is one that is not immune to the neoliberal economic model.

In the sixth chapter, Nealon considers the place of literature and criticism in a world where meaning-making has been co-opted by neoliberal technology. He provides a reading of banality in Kenneth Goldsmith's *The Weather*, as a way of illustrating how criticism which prioritizes significance and novelty is overlooking the potential of affect. It is for this reason that Nealon calls for "performative critique," which privileges what texts do over what they mean. This focus on the performative is essential as a mode of critical engagement, as Nealon argues, since this focus on performativity is at odds with neoliberal demands for new production, new meaning, new selves. Nealon concludes on this note, offering up performative critique as a mode of resistance to this current biopolitical era of neoliberalism which has neutralized the power of critique which seeks to produce new interpretations.

In all, *Fates of the Performative* is a quippy text that offers a fresh perspective on twenty-first-century criticism. Given that we are already enmeshed in a system of biopolitical neoliberalism, "performative critique" offers a new approach to criticism that is responsive to the current political circumstances. Nealon's lucid analysis of the parallels between contemporary criticism and neoliberal economics makes clear the importance of such an approach to criticism in the humanities. As such, this book is a worthwhile read for those interested in materiality and performance or those who are in search of a new mode of framing text and media in the age of biopolitics and mass production, where the metric of "meaning" is stretched thin over an endless stream of content.

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